Canada-China: 50th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations

By Jonathan Manthorpe

Synopsis

Fifty years after Ottawa and Beijing established formal diplomatic relations, the relationship between the People’s Republic of China and Canada has been driven into crisis by the Huawei affair. That crisis has a benefit, however. It has established beyond doubt what was already evident to those who cared to look. The very different expectations from the relationship between successive Ottawa governments and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were essentially incompatible and destined to lead to a crisis. For Canadian governments of both major political stripes, with their business and academic courtiers, the expectation was that exposure to Canadians manners and values would lure into accepting the fundamentals of domestic and international North Atlantic culture. The CCP managed to sustain the Canadian establishment in its self-delusion while pursuing its own transactional agenda. This focused on influencing Canadian public discourse on matters affecting the PRC, acquiring Canadian technology, ensuring access to Canadian resources and consumer market, and having the freedom to intimidate Canadians the CCP considers a threat to the one-party state.
About the Author
Jonathan Manthorpe has worked for all Canada’s major newspapers and news groups. He has been a foreign correspondent, war correspondent, and international affairs commentator for 40 years, and has been posted in Europe, Africa and Asia. For the 15 years before that, Manthorpe worked principally as a political reporter and columnist in Ontario.

While print journalism has been the central core of Manthorpe’s career, he has undertaken special projects for a number of governmental and non-government agencies. In 1981 and 1982 Manthorpe was part of a small team based in London to advise then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau on patriation of the Canadian Constitution. From 2003 to 2006 Manthorpe was a member of the Canada-Japan Forum advising the two prime ministers on ways to broaden and deepen bilateral relations. He has also been involved in projects for the United Nations, the Asia Development Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency and the Commonwealth Journalists’ Association.

The opening of formal diplomatic relations between Ottawa and Beijing in October 1970 was for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) the culmination of a campaign of influencing Canadian decision-makers that had begun 30 years before. It was in the city of Chongqing in China’s western Sichuan province in the 1930s and early 1940s that Zhou Enlai, CCP leader Mao Zedong’s astute and silkily manipulative right-hand man, met Canadian missionaries and their China-born adult children. He perceived quickly that these men were left-leaning in their politics and nursed deep disillusionment that, for some, reached antipathy and contempt for the authoritarian and corrupt Guomindang government of Chiang Kai-shek. Zhou set out to court men like the China-born United Church missionary James Endicott and Chester Ronning, the diplomat son of a Lutheran missionary.

He was completely successful. Both men sent back to Ottawa pictures of the CCP that minimized its aims of constructive social destruction. They bought the communists’ self-portrait of humble agrarian reformers. The Canadians were not the only ones fooled by Zhou’s charm and Mao’s deviousness. The book “Red Star Over China” by the ideologically sympathetic American journalist Edgar Snow created a favourable view of the Chinese Communist Party among the US public. Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt described them as “so-called Communists,” according to Yale University history professor Odd Arne Westad.

By the time the CCP took power in Beijing in 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had a receptive audience in Ottawa, where the tenets of the United Church’s social gospel were influencing the building of an independent foreign policy and diplomatic establishment. Among the staff of the Department of External Affairs being fashioned by Secretary of State Lester B. Pearson, a product of the Student Christian Movement and friend of Endicott, was a surprising number of “Mish Kids.” Indeed, after formal diplomatic relations were established with the PRC in 1970, the first three Canadian ambassadors to Beijing were Mish Kids.

While Zhou had planted deep in Ottawa’s Liberal establishment the idea that Canada had a special relationship with the PRC and the CCP, it was, ironically, John Diefenbaker’s Progressive Conservative Party that first established a working relationship with Beijing. In 1960 China was wracked by famine caused by Mao’s attempt at instant industrialization, The Great Leap Forward. Chinese officials approached Diefenbaker’s agriculture minister, Alvin Hamilton, for access to Canadian grains. But because of United States sanctions, they had no hard currency. Hamilton managed to get Diefenbaker’s skeptical Cabinet to agree to lend Beijing money to buy Canadian wheat and barley. Zhou was overjoyed and told Hamilton, according to Hamilton’s biographer Patrick Kyba, he had supplanted the Canadian communist battlefield doctor Norman Bethune as China’s best Canadian friend.

During the 1960s, egged on by men like Ronning, Endicott, and the McGill professor of Asian studies Paul Lin, the idea took root among Canadian policy-makers and the public that Ottawa should open formal diplomatic relations with Beijing. The Wheat Board’s experience had shown that the PRC had great potential as a market for Canadian goods, and there was a strong conviction in the Liberal Party, led by Pierre Trudeau, that it made no sense not to recognize the government that clearly controlled China. When Trudeau became Liberal Party leader and prime minister in the late 1960s, this purpose was formal party policy. It was just a matter of settling the details with Beijing. Even so, one of the details, the issue of the status of Taiwan in Canadian and CCP eyes, took 17 months to negotiate. It was on October 10, 1970, that External Affairs Minister Mitchell Sharp rose in the House of Commons to announce diplomatic relations between Ottawa and Beijing would be established three days later.

Canada entered the relationship with an open heart and open hands. Trade and the transfer of Canadian engineering and technical know-how were established on the precept that the PRC was a woefully deprived developing country needing Canadian aid. And Canadian universities and colleges began accepting Chinese students. The Chinese gravitated towards the science and technology faculties while Canadian students going to China, many of them captured by a romantic vision of Maoism, opted for language, history, and politics.

If anyone had cared to look closely, those early years were an accurate harbinger of things to come. The CCP always had and still has a clear view of the benefits and dangers of the relationship with Canada. To a significant extent, the story of Sino-Canadian relations in the fifty years since...
recognized that transparency is one of the most effective weapons to counter CCP infiltration of Canadian institutions.

Since its founding in 1984, CSIS paid special attention to efforts by CCP agents to benefit from the technological expertise and inventiveness available at Canadian colleges and universities. These activities have grown with the increasing reliance of Canadian academia on revenue from foreign students, among them 140,000 Chinese in 2020. When, in 2007, the British Columbia Institute of Technology, one of Canada’s major science and technology colleges, agreed to accept a Beijing-funded Confucius Institute it caught the attention of CSIS. On the surface, this and similar institutes established in other schools, colleges and universities later were intended to expose Canadian students to Chinese language, history, and culture. But CSIS agents began warning the administrators of Canadian academic institutions that the institutes were CCP espionage outposts, tasked with ensuring Chinese students didn’t get involved in unacceptable political or religious activities, and scouting for scientific and technological advances with military or commercial applications. CSIS’ concerns intensified in 2008 when the PRC launched its Thousand Talents Plan. This provides funds for Chinese scientists to work in Western universities and pays for Western scientists to take their skills to China. In August this year the Globe and Mail published a news story saying CSIS had warned universities and researchers that the PRC government was using the funding of research programs to lure Canadian academics and scientists to China with the hope of gaining commercial or military technologies.

Despite plenty of evidence, CSIS has had a hard time driving its message home to its political masters that the CCP is not and never will be a sincere friend of Canada. Throughout the Canadian establishment was and is a strata of people who have been beguiled by money or flattery into believing that expanding the relationship with the PRC can only benefit Canada. Even those who have understood the risks in the relationship and tried to minimize them have presented little challenge to Beijing’s political warfare campaign and its four main objectives.

The first objective is to try to ensure that Canada does not become a serious international critic of the CCP’s
undercover state security officers, “trusted agents,” and proxies to target members of Canada’s Chinese community identified as critics of President Xi.

John Townsend, the head of media relations for CSIS, was quoted as saying, “when individuals in Canada are subjected to such harassment, manipulation or intimidation by foreign states seeking to gather support for or mute criticism of their policies, these activities constitute a threat to Canada’s sovereignty and to the safety of Canadians.”

Another aim of Beijing’s infiltration is to create among Canadians of Chinese heritage cohorts who are sympathetic to the PRC’s global objectives and who can be rallied in support when called on. This is part of a CCP grand plan aimed at all 50 million people in the Chinese diaspora, especially those in Pacific Rim countries. Canada’s 1.5 million people of ethnic Chinese descent are not a cohesive community in any sense. They and their ancestors came to Canada over the last 150 years from a host of culturally diverse parts of China and for a multitude of reasons. Yet there are some long-running communal associations in several cities in Canada, and the CCP has focused on trying to take control of these with significant success. Starting around the year 2000, the CCP and its agents have also worked at taking effective editorial control of almost all Chinese-language media in Canada. Again, this is part of a diaspora-wide campaign that includes Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, and the United States.

There are many disturbing aspects of this racially targeted campaign. Most dangerous for Canada are its potential for stoking social upheaval among diverse communities of Canadians of ethnic Chinese heritage and the prospect of an anti-Asian backlash among non-Chinese Canadians. There have been incidents reflecting both these frictions in recent months. Pro-reform protests in Hong Kong and the imposition by Beijing of a new draconian security law on the territory have pitted Canadians of Hong Kong and Beijing loyalists against each other. The CCP’s efforts to suppress information about COVID-19 has sparked some abuse of and attacks on Asian Canadians. Fortunately, these incidents have been few and far between so far, but people within the Canadian-Chinese community are justifiably worried about even small rises in anti-Asian attacks. With the CCP stoking tensions within Canada, this story is not over.
Canada must put an end to the interference in the lives of Canadians of Chinese, Tibetan, Uighur, and Taiwanese heritages by the PRC embassy and consulates and the political warfare agencies like the United Front. Much could be achieved simply by a vigorous and transparent application of existing laws. Serious consideration should be given also to the introduction of laws similar to those enacted in Australia and Taiwan aimed at restricting the activities of foreign political agencies.

The other objectives of the CCP’s infiltration campaign have been equally successful.

In the past, successive Canadian governments have been reliable in not launching serious public criticism of the PRC’s abuses of human and civil rights in Tibet, Xinjiang, or China itself. That attitude has changed somewhat since Beijing’s response to the detention of Meng Wanzhou by detaining and torturing the Two Michaels and by imposing economic sanctions on Canada in defiance of World Trade Organization rules. In November 2020 the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights issued a report saying China’s persecution of the Muslim minority – through mass detentions in concentration camps, forced labour, state surveillance and population control measures – is a clear violation of human rights and is meant to “eradicate Uighur culture and religion.” The PRC foreign ministry spokesman retorted that the subcommittee report was groundless and “full of lies and disinformation.” The federal government too has been more vigorous recently. When Beijing in effect ended the promised 50 years of autonomy and British-style civil and judicial rights in Hong Kong, where 300,000 Canadian citizens live, the Canadian foreign minister joined those of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States in issuing a statement criticizing Beijing’s new security law for the territory. In July 2020, Ottawa suspended its extradition treaty with Hong Kong, and has expedited the refugee process for some Hong Kong pro-democracy advocates.

Less laudable has been Canada’s lack of criticism for Beijing’s occupation of the South China Sea and its building of seven military bases on artificial islands in defiance of international law. Not only has this act of imperial expansion given the CCP a high degree of control over one of the world’s most important maritime trade routes, it has serious implications for the threat of nuclear war. The seven islands protect the approaches to the People’s Liberation Army Navy base near Sanya at the southern tip of Hainan Island. This is the home of the PRC’s growing fleet of intercontinental ballistic missile submarines. The takeover of the South China Sea makes it far easier for these submarines with their second-strike nuclear weapons to travel undetected to and from the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Also of military consequence is that Ottawa has not yet stood firmly with the democratic island nation of Taiwan, which the CCP claims to own and threatens to invade, again without any compelling legal or historical justification.

The social and political polarization and upheaval in the US has a long way to go before it is resolved. America’s most intense focus for the foreseeable future is going to be on its own travails. It is unlikely to lose its world view, but it is not going to be as dependable an anchor for its allies as it has been. With this in mind, Canada needs to adopt more assertive defence policies and capabilities, especially in the Indo-Pacific region and the Arctic. Canada needs to strengthen ties with its military allies in the Indo-Pacific, especially Australia, Japan, and South Korea. Those countries are also logical partners for joint submarine and surface ship construction projects.

The CCP’s seduction of Canada’s business elite, especially those corporate barons with the most potent political clout, has been impressive. Trade in goods and services between Canada and China has grown significantly since 1970, but even though the PRC is now Canada’s third-ranking trade partner after the United States and the European Union, the relationship is lopsided. According to Statistics Canada, in 2019, imports from China totalled $75 billion and exports to China were $23.2 billion, down from $27.7 billion the year before because of Chinese reprisals over the Huawei affair. Canada buys consumer goods and technical equipment and, much as it did in the 1960s and 1970s, sells China grains, other agricultural products such as meat, and natural resources. Yet the value of China’s Canadian imports in 2019 represented only 1.6 per cent of Canadian gross domestic product, according to figures published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. This ranks Canada 74th on the list of countries measured by their economic dependence on their trade relationship with the PRC. So it is a tribute to the success of the CCP’s agents of
influence in Canada’s business and political worlds that when Beijing threatens or imposes sanctions on Canadian products, as it has over the Huawei affair, it is made to sound as though the economy is threatened with collapse. That is not the story the numbers tell.

Coupled with the objective of dominating the trade relationship efforts to obtain control of Canadian natural resources. Successful Canadian governments have struggled to give a clear response when PRC state-owned companies have moved to buy Canadian resource companies. In December 2012, Prime Minister Stephen Harper reluctantly approved the $15.1 billion takeover of Calgary-based Nexen Inc. by the China National Offshore Oil Company. Harper said the acquisition was “the end of a trend” rather than a beginning. “When we say that Canada is open for business, we do not mean that Canada is for sale to foreign governments,” he said at a news conference. Henceforward, bids by state-owned foreign companies on oil sand businesses would only be considered in “exceptional circumstances,” Harper said. The prime minister added that his government had been concerned for some time that “a series of large-scale controlling transactions by foreign state-owned companies could rapidly transform [the oil sands] industry from one that is essentially a free market to one that is effectively under control of a foreign government.”

The rules for investment in Canada by state-owned foreign companies need to be clarified and codified to provide a clear set of rules. COVID-19 has given this added urgency because the pandemic – and the certainty that it is not the last – require a redefinition of what aspects of the economy are essential to national security.

A tool is readily at hand to begin moving the central focus of Canada’s Indo-Pacific trade and diplomatic policy away from China while trying to retain a functional, transactional relationship with Beijing. Canada is a member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. Other members are Australia, Brunei, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. This is a sophisticated agreement that sets out an ethical culture within which trade should be conducted. Thus it is a pact that encourages the development of shared civic values. Canada should make the partnership the hub of its Pacific Rim and Indian Ocean trade initiatives and should encourage the membership of other regional nations such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia.

Canada should strengthen its public relationship with Taiwan; under the terms of Ottawa’s mutual diplomatic recognition agreement with Beijing, Canada has room to engage with Taipei at senior levels to a greater extent than it has done. For too long, successive Canadian governments have bowed to the PRC’s insistence that all dealings with the island nation and its 23 million people must follow Beijing’s script. This includes all kinds of wording and descriptions aimed at demeaning Taiwan’s status. Canada should make clear that its diplomatic relations with Taiwan are with a sovereign country. Ottawa should forcefully support Taiwan’s inclusion in international organizations, including the World Health Organization, where it used to have observer status until Beijing objected.

For the future, there are likely to be challenges for Canada in Beijing’s “Belt and Road Initiative,” a 2013 multi-trillion-dollar initiative launched by PRC President and CCP leader Xi Jinping to invest in a massive road, rail, and port infrastructure linking China efficiently to all regions of Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. Coupled with that is Beijing’s “Polar Silk Road,” a plan announced in 2018 aimed at reinforcing the PRC’s self-identification as a “near-Arctic” state. Beijing has for nearly two decades seen that global warming and the shrinking of the Arctic ice cap present opportunities for the development of previously inaccessible mineral reserves and for new maritime transportation corridors. Chinese companies began using the Northeast Passage along Russia’s northern coast as a shortcut to Europe for its merchant ships in 2012. The route halves the time it takes to transport goods from China to Europe, with significant savings in fuel costs. When the Northwest Passage becomes a practical and dependable sea lane to and from the North Atlantic, Beijing plans to be ready to take advantage. The PRC and its companies have spent billions of dollars buying Russian liquefied natural gas facilities and a research station in Iceland. China also has plans for investing in mines, energy projects, and infrastructure in Alaska, Greenland, and Iceland. In the Canadian North, PRC companies are already involved in joint-venture mining projects in northern Quebec, Nunavut, and Yukon. Since 2008, Huawei Technologies has been engaged in building an internet network across the Northwest Territories.

The message to Ottawa and Canada’s junior administrations involved in the Arctic ought to be clear: if Canada does not
swiftly produce a clear policy for the future of the North and its peoples, others will. This is a time when Canada should be investing in the North and asserting its sovereignty. What should be done about the resources that are being revealed and made accessible by global warming is no longer a question that can be set aside. The economic development and militarization of the Arctic are going to take place whether Canada and Canadians like it or not. But Canada will not be able to assert its will even over its own territory unless it has a clear idea of its objectives and is backing that vision with money.

Only in 2019 and 2020 were Canadians finally given a clear picture of the true nature of their relationship with the Chinese Communist Party and the People’s Republic of China. Huawei had a starring role in most aspects of this revelation. On December 1, 2018, border control officers at Vancouver International Airport detained Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei and the daughter of the founder, Ren Zhengfei. She was detained en route from China to Mexico on an extradition warrant issued by the United States Department of Justice. It is alleged that Meng lied to officials from the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation and that she claimed she had the ability to help them avoid US sanctions against Iran. It was evident as soon as news of the detention became known that this moment would change the Sino-Canadian relationship for years and perhaps generations.

Beijing responded viscerally and in character when it realized that Canada intended to meet its obligations under its extradition treaty with the US and to allow the process to follow the rule of law under the direction of the independent judiciary. It took hostages, a well-established CCP tactic in disputes. Michael Kovrig, a former Canadian diplomat working in China for the International Crisis Group, and Michael Spavor, a Canadian businessman specializing in commercial introductions to North Korea, were picked up. They were held in solitary confinement and interrogated daily for several months. They were subjected to sleep deprivation, which is widely regarded as torture. For months, PRC officials denied the two Michaels were being held hostage, though the direct connection to the detention of Meng Wanzhou was obvious to all. Beijing went ahead with a charade of charging the two men with espionage and then denying Canadian diplomats consular access to them in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The hostage-taking was backed up with economic sanctions against Canada. In March 2019, the PRC blocked the importation of canola seeds from some Canadian suppliers. Between June and November of the same year, there was a ban on Canadian pork and beef which cost producers between $300 million and $500 million. In June 2020 the embargoes were extended to Canadian seafood, especially lobster, which was subjected to random tests for COVID-19. The same month, PRC officials claimed to have found beetles in Canadian logs and halted imports. Also in 2020, PRC student applications to Canadian schools, colleges, and universities dropped by 44 per cent, and Chinese tourism to Canada was blocked almost entirely because of the pandemic.

Beijing’s reaction to the Meng detention revealed how shallow are the foundations on which the Sino-Canadian relationship is based. Specifically, it underlined that there are few human communal values shared between the CCP and Canadians. There are no common views on human or civil rights, no significant political partnership as fellow Pacific Rim nations, no common approaches to regional security, and no comradeship in the construction and purpose of international institutions.

Ottawa should apply sanctions and embargoes provided by the Magnitsky Act against the PRC officials responsible for the abduction and torture of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig. Other sanctions should be applied to officials involved in the trade sanctions imposed on Canada, perhaps by rejecting student or visitor visas for senior CCP members complicit in those economic attacks.

The Huawei Affair also put on show the attitudes of senior Canadians who had driven Sino-Canadian policies and relations. In January 2019, John McCallum, Canada’s ambassador to Beijing and a former minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship in the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, gave an interview to a Chinese-language newspaper circulating in his old constituency outside Toronto. McCallum offered the opinion that the allegations against Meng were politically driven and part of the Donald Trump administration’s trade war with Beijing. This was in direct conflict with the Trudeau government’s official line, but one being promoted by friends of Beijing. McCallum was forced to resign. Around the same time, John Manley, a former Liberal minister of foreign affairs who had
become a spokesman for the China business lobby, said Canadian officials had made a mistake detaining Meng, despite the treaty with Washington. Canada, he said, should have engaged in “creative incompetence” and not detained her. Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien is reported to have delivered a similar message to business leaders in June 2019. Quoting unnamed Ottawa sources, the Globe and Mail reported on June 13 that Chrétien had been urging his business contacts to lobby the Trudeau government to stop the legal proceedings against Meng and release her in exchange for the Two Michaels.

Chrétien’s argument was rejected the same day by then Global Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland, who said such an exchange would create a very dangerous precedent that would put at risk all Canadians living in or visiting China. Later in 2019 Manley was one of those advocating that Canada try to arrange a “prisoner swap” of the two Michaels for Meng. Prime Minister Trudeau got the same suggestion in June 2020 in a letter from 19 former eminent Canadians, including a retired Supreme Court judge. It was notable that none of the signatories were diplomats who had worked in China.

Accepting the idea of a prisoner swap, of course, means accepting several normally unpalatable steps towards solving what had become a full crisis in Canada-PRC relations. One is that there is a moral equivalence between Canada’s actions adhering to its treaty obligations and the rule of law, and the Chinese Communist Party taking hostages for ransom. Along a similar line is the notion that the plight of the two Michaels makes it acceptable for a nation like Canada to give in to hostage taking and abandon some of the essential principles of its social contract with its citizens and the world.

The Huawei Affair is not only about the fate of Meng and the two Michaels. It is also about the future of Canada’s security intelligence relationship with its essential allies: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. In the Second World War these countries formed what is known as the “Five Eyes” alliance of their intelligence agencies. Throughout the Cold War this alliance was an essential armament in the confrontation with the Soviet Union and its allies. For the four junior partners of the Five Eyes it is at the heart of the mutual security commitment with the US. But in 2018 Washington said it had concluded that Huawei has ties to the PRC state and could be required by the CCP to supply sensitive information from its telecommunications networks. Therefore, said Washington, it was banning Huawei from being involved in the latest 5G high-speed data-transmission networks. More than that, if US allies wanted to keep their intelligence relationships with Washington, they too must ban Huawei from involvement in 5G networks. Australia and New Zealand readily complied. The UK dithered for a while, but finally agreed. Only Canada has still not made a definitive statement.

Because of the Trudeau government’s substantial silence on the crisis in the relationship with Beijing and its lack of any muscular response on many of the issues involved, an unfortunate and potentially dangerous picture is left. Ottawa seems mesmerized by the situation and stunned into paralysis. Yet, as described above, there are many actions that the Liberal government and the Ottawa political community can and should take, though they require some courage, toughness, and willingness to confront and sweep aside entrenched and influential special interests.

Most essential is to recognize that Canada’s future relationship with the PRC cannot and will not be as it has been in the past. The fictions that Canada has a special relationship with the CCP and that the party will take Canada’s guidance on any facet of political or legal reform have been blown out of the water. Canada was useful to the CCP in the 1960s and 1970s on its own merit and as a straw man on which to practice the soft power and political warfare skills it would use after emerging from the isolation of the Mao years. But now it has bigger fish to fry. It is intent on becoming a global superpower, maybe the global superpower. The days when Canada figured among countries deserving respectful consideration are long gone. Hopefully, politicians in Ottawa can come to a bipartisan or even multi-partisan recognition that the only relationship with the PRC that can be desired or achieved for the foreseeable future is a strictly transactional one. Meanwhile, the rest of Asia beckons.
About the CIC

The Canadian International Council (CIC) is Canada’s foreign relations council. It is an independent, non-partisan membership organization and think tank dedicated to advancing constructive dialogue on Canada’s place in the world and providing an incubator for innovative ideas on how to address the world’s most pressing problems.

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